DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 081 RC 020 921

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TITLE Land Access, Protection and Permits.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 8p.; In: Proceedings of the 1995 International Conference on Outdoor Recreation and Education; see RC 020 917.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Camping; *College Programs; *Conservation (Environment); Diversity (Institutional); *Federal Regulation; Higher Education; *Land Use; Natural Resources; Organizations (Groups); *Outdoor Education; Parks; Public Agencies; *Public Policy; Service Learning
IDENTIFIERS Outdoor Recreation; *Public Lands; Resource Management

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a panel discussion that included 25 students and outdoor education and recreation professionals on issues related to land use and outdoor education and recreation programs. Many participants expressed frustration over inconsistent management policies related to educational and recreational use of public lands. Participants reported that there is no predictable manner in which agencies interpret land use by colleges and nonprofit groups. The panel also pointed out that organizing a collective voice for advocating land use among educational users would be difficult due to the diversity of outdoor education programs. For example, there are college degree programs, noncredit college courses, and college sponsored adventure clubs, all of which use public lands. Another problem area is reaching agreement for defining outdoor education for land permit purposes. For example, land permits for Forestry Service lands are issued by forest rangers based on district requirements, which may vary widely among districts. The panel also addressed problems associated with increased use of public lands and additional demands placed on natural resources. Recommendations included promoting outdoor education as the best source for teaching minimum impact camping techniques, examining the economic benefits of outdoor recreation programs, and demonstrating commitment to land stewardship by incorporating service projects in outdoor education programs. A follow-up meeting of panel participants stressed the need to define the role and purpose of the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) in promoting public land use by outdoor programs and considered land management as a potential critical focus of future AORE conferences. (LP)

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Land Access, Protection and Permits

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Abstract:

This proceedings paper is a general summary of discussions occurring at the panel presentation facilitated by Keith Thurman of the Access Fund and Steve Munsell of Prescott College. A follow up meeting was held during the "best of the best" time slot which was facilitated by Jim Rodgers, AORE board member and outgoing chair of the land use committee. Subheadings are used in the text to break it up by content areas. Opinions expressed are paraphrased from the discussion or are my own. No policy reviews were completed to assure accuracy of statements regarding specific regulations on use of public lands.

Format of Panel Discussion

A go round style introduction of participants at the workshop provided a way to scope the issues facing University based programs today. It served as a good introduction of students and professionals gathered at the meeting. Several common threads emerged as the 25 or so people in attendance summarized the land use issues each program is experiencing at their home locations. This round table process took about half the time scheduled for the meeting. This was an investment on the part of the group, but a good use of our time in the sense that we acquired a good broad view of the issues as expressed by a peer group.

Discussion Summary

There was quite a bit of frustration expressed about the different federal bureaucracies managing public lands. Most frustration was based around inconsistency in management policies related to educational and recreational use of public lands. Although many of the issues are centered in the West, people from mid-West and Eastern schools discussed issues of State managed park lands and private property in addition to federally managed lands. River issues were mentioned in Southeast locations that receive concentrated private use and alot of organized commercial trips.

The consistent point made during the go round was the inconsistencies experienced with the various agencies in permitting of organized groups. There is just no predictable consistency in how agencies or personnel within agencies will interpret organized use by colleges and non profits. Occasionally these inconsistencies will have merit when issues end up interpreted in favor of access for the program. It was pointed out that we do not as a profession represent ourselves in any organized fashion. There is no consolidated movement towards creating a collective voice for land use among educational users. A counter point was made that it would be difficult to represent the profession because of the diversity of outdoor programs across undergraduate education in America. A collective voice is not easily heard from such broad constituency.

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The point was made that in some agencies personnel resources were in such a state that people were not available to coordinate volunteer programs. The agencies are not always well organized to accept the labor that a service oriented group might offer. In closing someone added that service projects can also be good public relations present good opportunities for publicity.

More Solutions, ideas for action

The follow up meeting was pretty focused on brainstorming ideas of what to do and trying to cajole each other into committing to the follow up to see something through. Jim Rodgers facilitated and brought a valuable AORE perspective to the discussion.

We must define the AORE position. AORE needs a position statement and a definition of our role and purpose on public lands. We can advance our own agenda through greater organization within the association. We can request greater assistance from ORCA on the permit issue. Make public lands management and access issues could become a greater priority within the coalition. We could make access and lands management a greater focus of future conferences. We could organize a series of workshops with the theme of access and stewardship for outdoor programs.

We want to find ways to get others to work on this agenda too. Create a liaison with the Leave No Trace program. We should look at the Access Fund model of work that focusing on specific local issues in an active way.

Much interest was expressed about greater information on how permitting processes work and how the agencies are organized. How do you appeal a decision? There is clearly a need for greater education among ourselves on how it all works. A published handbook, "permit and agency primer for program administrators" was suggested. Getting a commitment from ORCA to provide a legal intern to research and compile government documents on permit regulations was an idea everyone liked. It was thought to be a valuable resource to have regulations on permits and access compiled and indexed in some fashion.

Work Locally, think nationally

The areas that matter the most for your programs future are the ones you currently use. Because there is so much variation in Federal procedure based upon who you are dealing with it is most important to have a good working relationship with your local agency people. This cannot be over emphasized. It is often true that the management outcome your program is hoping for on a permit issue may boil down to the subjective judgment or "feel" that the agency person has for your program or you. It can also come down to who you know. Who might be able to influence a decision or at least get the agencies attention? Your college or University president? The mayor?, the Governor? Perhaps your congressman or Senator. Most people at the follow up meeting had written their congressman and Senator on permit related issues. Educating the decision makers. We must advance the state of knowledge on the issue for all involved.

Programs--Recreational or credit bearing

Someone illustrated this diversity by describing how programs differ at different colleges. Most programs are offered as extra curricular recreation opportunities to balance out a student's academic program. Other programs may be taken for credit under physical education departments. Many programs have well developed recreation degree programs that utilize outdoor pursuits as a part of their curriculum. One college may run several types of programs under one administrative umbrella.

Degree programs in Outdoor Adventure Education or Wilderness Leadership are also offered at some colleges and make use of public lands in credit bearing curriculum. These organized credit bearing and non credit bearing programs are joined by other program types at the university including common adventure programs and clubs. This was offered to show how it could be difficult to create a unified voice for the profession nationally.

Definitions, Non-Commercial, Commercial, Semi Public

Discussion turned to particulars of how outdoor programs have been defined for permit purposes and the general gray area of permit definitions. The problem of definition for educational trips was clear to the group since there are very few specific permit definitions that apply directly to educational groups. Most permits are described as non-commercial or commercial. We reviewed these definitions and it was the groups view that neither of these definitions fit most of the activities sponsored by the colleges represented at the meeting.

There was strong opinion that a positive direction to head was to pursue a specific use definition for educational programs conducted under permit on the various public lands. There was general agreement that it would be nice to have a use definition that fit your activity instead of not have a category to fit in. We reviewed the definitions for commercial use coming from agencies and agreed that the interpretation of many university programs as commercial is the more accurate definition. Several universities represented at the meeting were using commercial permits for their programs. This brought up many other issues for program people at the meeting. Outward Bound and NOLS were mentioned as examples of non-profit programs that operated under commercial permits for their access to public lands.

Mike Caveness shared background information on a different type of definition of use that has been helpful for agencies in finding a more accurate category from which to manage educational use of public lands. This permit category was described as "Semi Public Outfitting" The Gallatin National Forest issued permits to the Montana State University at Bozeman under this definition. The Program Director from Bozeman offered this as a alternative definition to pursue with the agencies. He produced some documentation of this permit type and offered to post it for others to examine.

Special Use Permits

Being under a commercial use definition may have some advantages for colleges because it may be the only type of official sanction that can be obtained. Special Use Permits are common on Forest Service lands. It is the Department

of Agriculture's commercial permit for use of forest lands. Agencies may have well developed administrative systems to process commercial permit applications and management of the subsequent use. This is not always the case and others offered the problem of local agencies being inefficient or overworked with respect to processing permit applications. Special Use Permits are usually done by individual ranger districts in each forest. There is a great deal of variety between different ranger districts. Some ranger districts may require as much as a one year lead time to process permit requests.

Other ranger districts may have moratoriums in place on issuing new special use permits in wilderness areas. Generally the agency will be required to gather alot of information and documentation from the college. In certain situations the forest may have to do a NEPA process, Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) or some other administrative process which results in a considerable investment in workload on the part of the agency and the program. The point was made that ski areas or other major developments or businesses run under the same type of permit that a Forest may require for a college group running a week long leadership seminar in the Forest.

Impacts on Resources

The problem of increasing use and the additional demands placed on the natural resources by the growing numbers of organized programs came up at this time. It was acknowledged by many that part of the issue of continued access to Federally managed lands has boiled down to the increased pressures on the lands. This can be viewed singly or cumulatively. There are many many more organized "entities" using the outdoors for recreation, education or a place to conduct outings for any number of other special purposes. The land manager is in a tough place being charged with protecting the natural conditions from deterioration in the face of increasing pressure for use from all the various constituencies.

Outdoor education programs and organized recreation groups have joined the ranks of special interest groups in that it has become necessary to lobby the management agencies for access. On forest lands, the agency is beset with demands placed on the resource by a whole host of "multiple users" with a legislative mandate to accommodate this variety of uses. All the agencies are tasked with stewardship of their lands. On Interior lands under management by the National Park Service, the agency has the additional mandate to provide for access yet balance uses to conserve natural values for later generations of visitors. The boom in the outdoors has coincided with additional legislative mandates and a more modern era in recreation management.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 created legislation that bridged across agencies with a specific set of management priorities to regulate designated wilderness lands. These priorities identify protection of the existing natural conditions on the land as a primary management objective. As important as the additional protection is for the resource; it creates a stricter management standard with respect to visitor impacts. An end result of this is visitor limitations in areas actively being managed to preserve their wilderness values. New resource measuring methods used in the "limits of acceptable change" process provide agencies with more quantified data that show impacts to the resource from human recreation.

Social standards have been developed to quantify the subjective element of "user experience" and "opportunity for solitude". Years ago areas that may have received little use now receive enough visitation that it is thought that the natural values for recreation have been impacted by the sheer numbers of visitors.

The group shared a common empathy for the situation faced in the federal agencies tasked with managing our natural resources. The pressures being felt are beyond what the lands can sustain and natural values are being degraded. Since the recreation boom we have seen increased human impacts in highly visited areas. Recreation use and subsequent impacts are being lumped in with other uses and not necessarily being seen as any different a use as than say mining or logging. An outrage is expressed about the land stewardship role modeled by the USFS and BLM where resource extraction has been the operative management priority for nearly a century. That this appears to be a fully protected public right though such antiquated legislation as the 1872 mining act is equally outrageous. Meanwhile outdoor education programs have a heap of bureaucratic hurdles to leap just to access public lands to conduct activities many feel have positive, even virtuous benefits for the public. Which public are the lands for? The extractive industries of timber, mining, and grazing have left much of our natural heritage in a state of ruin. The agencies have been in partnership with industry in allowing this to occur.

The cumulative effects of the recreation boom are now being felt in more popular areas where crowds of visitors have created related impacts that are obvious and significant. Yet the nature of these impacts does not compare to the impacts created by sustained resource extraction. It was felt that impacts on widespread tracts of public land have concentrated recreation use and hence impacts on fewer acres of lands.

Problems, problems, Solutions ??

The group soon tired of sharing similar problems common to all of us. Focus then turned to what can we do as a profession to work towards solutions. Mr. Thurman had a unique perspective coming from outside the outdoor education community but actively working with agencies towards solutions in specific areas. His point was that we must project ourselves as the best source of training available to the public in the teaching of minimum impact camping techniques. He suggested a closer association with the "Leave No Trace" program initiated by NOLS in conjunction with the agencies. This program is now an independent non-profit organization based out of Boulder. This group shares a common office space with the Access Fund and ORCA. Identifying outdoor education programs as the source for training in Leave No Trace skills may help agencies recognize the positive impact programs can have on the resource by producing recreationalists who care. It is recognized that a small number of untrained or abusive users can create alot of impact in a short time. Although the numbers represented on the lands by the outdoor education programs are quite large the actual impacts on the resource may be lower when compared with the same number of private user days since programs operate in a more controlled setting and have a focus on minimum impact skills.

The issue of the size of the profession nation wide was raised and the point about the positive economic impact created by field programs providing trips for people in the outdoors. This economic impact has never been studied, quantified, or assessed in a formal way. The comparison was made to the economic impact of the outfitting and guiding industry and tourism in general. Travel, tourism and outdoor recreation are major players in the economic base of many rural communities or towns bordering National Parks or popular forest recreation lands. The outfitting and guiding industry has turned this powerful economic base into an equally powerful political base in certain states.

The suggestion was made to get ourselves together as a profession and get some lobbying representation in Washington. We could see our use of public land acquire greater credibility based on economics alone.
Someone hoped a student might take on a Master's project of collecting data on the economic scope of the field nationally. It was generally felt that having a greater collective identity to project nationally was the only way to make headway on this issue from the top down.

Service, partnerships

Another area for positive interaction with agencies and returning something to the land is the service project. The general state of non-funding and budget cuts coming out of the 104th congress has created a crisis in the agencies for lack of funds to carry out their mandated tasks. There is very little money coming out to agencies and agencies are looking for creative strategies to cope. It may well be that one day the only ones out actively managing public lands will be volunteers. The agencies are eager to develop cooperative projects with suitably committed groups. Part of the "reinventing government" experiment in the Forest Service was to find new ways to reach management objectives. This can take shape for outdoor education programs as a real opportunity to make a positive contribution on the ground. The "adopt a trail program" of the Forest service was cited as an example of a cooperative program currently in place.

The hope was expressed that the stewardship the land needs goes far beyond what can be accomplished in a one day service project setting. One day service projects are a good place to start but the opportunity for long term or ongoing service will do alot more to demonstrate to local agency people your programs commitment to stewardship. The challenging element of integrating significant service into the short term outdoor recreation outing can be difficult for programs. Losing time from your planned program is inevitable so it is important that the service element is integrated into the whole experience successfully. Students will be more committed to service work when it is seen as an integral part of a greater whole. Service learning is an educational method that focuses on the connection of service to the learning experience at hand. Significant service work and partnership programs with the agencies will not succeed if they are just added or tacked onto the outings without being integrated into the program.

Service work contribution to the resource was also mentioned as a way to earn user day credits that in some instances can be subtracted off the annual use figures reported on the permit. Detail information on this idea was a little lacking.

We closed thinking about ways to keep the information exchange happening between interested professionals. Munsell wants to create a targeted survey to distribute to college programs to see what type of permits most schools have and especially what their current land use issues are. News updates in the ORCA flash or the AORE newsletter would be helpful. Jim Rodgers implored the group that someone needs to join the land use task force to organize the AORE effort.